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ABSTRACT

Differential predictors of the educational achievement status of homeless children were studied using multivariate statistical modeling. The effects of more general influences such as age, gender, and maternal educational level were studied before the influence of intellectual, behavioral, and emotional factors was examined. Participants were families of 127 homeless children receiving services in a comprehensive health care program for homeless children in Baltimore (Maryland). Results of the study provide support for age, gender, and maternal educational level as important predictors of academic achievement in school-aged homeless children and adolescents. Overall cognitive functioning, however, was the most salient predictor of academic performance. This finding suggests that the depressed cognitive functioning found in homeless and disadvantaged children is an important focus for remedial efforts. Emotional distress and behavioral problems were significant contributors to academic achievement levels beyond background and cognitive factors, and should also be targets for efforts to improve academic achievement and learning potential. Characteristics of homelessness such as residential instability and the level of major life stressors did not account for significant proportions of the variance in academic achievement. (Contains five references.) (SLD)

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CHILD AND FAMILY PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING IN HOMELESS CHILDREN

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Research on the effects of homelessness on children's educational, developmental and mental health status has yielded inconsistent results. While some investigations have reported serious detrimental effects among the majority of children in homeless families (e.g., Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1990; Zima, Wells & Freeman, 1994), others have reported more conservative estimates consistent with outcomes typically reported for children in impoverished, housed families (e.g., Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Berman, Ramirez & Neeman, 1993; Rescorla, Parker & Stolley, 1991). In a recent review of studies on the mental health of homeless children, Holden, Horton and Danseco (1995) noted that such inconsistencies reflect conceptual and methodological limitations of research in this area. Recommendations were made for avoiding specific methodological pitfalls and utilizing existing frameworks in developmental psychopathology as conceptual bases for guiding research in this area. The use of multivariate analytic approaches which hierarchically control for the influence of general factors related to poverty before examining the specific contextual factors of homelessness that may influence outcomes was highly recommended.

The purpose of the present investigation was to identify differential predictors of school aged homeless children's educational achievement status utilizing multivariate statistical modeling. We were specifically interested in convarying out the effects of more general influences (e.g., age, gender, maternal educational level) prior to examining the influence of intellectual, behavioral and emotional factors as predictors of educational achievement status. Finally, we evaluated the effects of major life stressors and residential instability once the variance related to more general factors and current cognitive, behavioral and emotional status were statistically controlled.

Method

Participants for this study were homeless families receiving services in a comprehensive health care program for homeless children in Baltimore City, the Families in Transition (FIT) program. the sample consisted of 127 school aged children with a mean age of 10.6 (SD = 2.1). Forty-nine percent of the children were male and 51% were female. Mean number of school years completed by the mothers was 11.8 (SD = 1.7).

Participants were evaluated at the time of intake into the program. Mothers participated in a structured interview with social work staff to evaluate family history of homelessness and parental health and mental health history. In addition, mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist and the life stress scale from the Parenting Stress Index. Children were independently evaluated by a psychologist and were administered the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale: Fourth Edition to assess intellectual status, the Children's Depression Inventory to evaluate current emotional status, and the Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised to assess academic achievement levels.

Results

Overall performance on the measures was consistent with the general literature on the educational and mental health of homeless children. The mean overall IQ score from the SBIV was 89.0 (SD = 12.3) and quite consistent with the mean results reported for impoverished inner city samples participating in the SBIV standardization. However, overall academic achievement was below the levels predicted by the overall intellectual level obtained in this study in the areas of mathematics (mean standard score = 83.9, SD = 16.8), reading (mean standard score = 83.6, SD = 18.5), and spelling (mean spelling score = 85.1, SD = 19.2). The overall mean T-score (M = 55.4, SD = 12.2) on the Child Behavior Checklist was elevated compared to norms, but once again consistent with the published literature on homeless children. The mean Children's Depression Inventory score (M = 8.9, SD = 6.6) was not significantly higher than normative data. Number of family residential changes in the last year averaged 5.2 (SD = 14.5) and was used as a variable to represent residential instability.

Hierarchical regression analyses were computed to evaluate the relationships of the predictor variables to academic achievement scores. Age, gender, and maternal educational level were entered as a block to control for their effects followed by the full scale score from the SBIV, the CDI total score, the CBCL total T-score and the number of moves in the last year. Approximately 46% of the variance was accounted for in the equation predicting mathematics achievement scores with age, gender, intellectual level, and level of depression as significant predictors. Nearly 48% of the variance was predicted in reading achievement scores with age, maternal educational level, intellectual level, level of depression, and level of behavior problems as significant predictors. Approximately 46% of the variance in spelling achievement scores was accounted for in regression analyses with maternal educational level, intellectual level, level of depression, and level of behavior problems as significant predictors. It is interesting to note that neither major life stressors or number of family residential changes in the last year accounted for significant proportions of variance in academic achievement scores.

Discussion

The results of our study provide support for age, gender, and maternal educational level as important predictors of academic achievement performance in school aged homeless children and adolescents. Overall cognitive functioning, however, was the most salient predictor of academic performance indicating that depressed cognitive functioning found in homeless and disadvantaged children is an important factor to focus on in remediation efforts. It should also be noted that emotional distress and behavioral problems were significant contributors to academic achievement levels beyond background and cognitive factors and should also be included as important targets for efforts aimed at improving academic achievement and learning potential. Characteristics of homelessness such as residential instability and level of major life stressors did not account for significant proportions of the variance in academic achievement.

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